Cannibal of the Opera

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Cannibal of the Opera

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

It is, without question, The Event of the season: the newest play from the Opéra Populaire, which is purported to detail the strange and magical affair of the Phantom of the Opera, a mystery never fully explained, a mystery that transpired right in Paris in the bowels of the opera house. Even better, the reclusive husband of Count Lecter has come to attend the opening night - a husband rumored to be intimately connected to the strange and magical mystery.

As the opera plays out across the stage, secrets are revealed - secrets of both the Count Lecter and his mysterious husband.

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Notes

This fic is my entry for the Reel Hannibal 2020 and was based off of Phantom of the Opera. Specifically I am drawing from the film adaption of the 25th Anniversary at the Royal Albert Hall, as that was my introduction to Phantom of the Opera, but I also drew some inspiration from the video essays of likes of Dom Noble and Lindsay Ellis.

Also, Hannibal is missing an eye. And there is singing. Because I can.

See the end of the work for more notes

Overture

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is a crisp, cool autumn breeze that sweeps across the street as attendees hurry into the opera hall. They shed their coats in the entryway, revealing a wide array of sparkling dresses and glittering jewelry, and the champagne flows so freely that it is rivaled only by the intense gossip.

It is, after all, not every day that the Opéra Populaire hosts a show about itself.

Yet the announcements were made ages ago, rehearsals have been held for weeks, and now eager socialites clamor to enter the hall and be witness to the story of the great mystery that captured the attention of Paris for months – and still holds great interest years later, when most of the people involved have passed on or retired or vanished to places unknown.

What is better, they whisper among themselves, than a mystery that has defied explanation for decades?

Eventually, the porters usher the guests in, with the lucky few climbing the stairs to enclosed, comfortable private boxes. The boxes are often reserved for the wealthiest or the most powerful, although all eyes are upon Box Five, a cornerstone of the great mystery. Normally it remains empty during all performances, with a single chair and table with a fresh rose upon it as the only occupants, a tradition that has held fast through countless plays and performances. Yet tonight, tonight of all nights, keen eyed guests spot that there are *two* chairs in Box 5, and the curtain has been drawn back to allow entrance.

Who is that, they whisper among themselves, to dare be seated in Box 5 and break with tradition?

The guests are seated, the refreshments served, the programs distributed. The lights are dimmed, the curtains lowered, the orchestra settled. And like magic, slowly a hush begins to fall over the crowd, sweeping the room like a wave, until the room is so silent a pin could drop and be heard from corner to corner, and a short, stout man climbs up the stairs to stand upon the stage.

“Welcome, one and all!” cries the man. “You are very welcome, indeed, to the first in our brand new production! It will involve stunning dances, wonderful music, and, of course, the finest singers in all of France.”

The man pauses, ever so slightly, and tilts his head as if he can hear the whispers growing in the crowd. He must like what he hears, for he beams from ear and ear and continues, “As you may have heard, this production details the strange and magical affair of the Phantom of the Opera, a mystery never fully explained – a mystery that transpired right in the very opera house you now sit in.”

A spotlight turns on with a heavy click. The bright circle of light roams across the guests, skipping on the floor and floating as if on water, before it finally settles upon Box 5. When the man points, the guests turn to see that the two chairs are filled now, quite suddenly, as if the box's occupants had appeared from thin air, drawn out of the shadows by the bright light. Two men sit there now, regal and silent, dressed in the unobtrusively expensive finery that denotes old wealth and an even older bloodline. One has curls that frame an angelic face and a prominent scar high on his cheek; the other has cheekbones sharp enough to slice through ice and an eyepatch as black as night.

"And tonight, we are proud to announce the production under the continued and generous patronage of the Count Lecter, who not only has been a devoted supporter of the arts, but whose husband was involved in the very events that you will see tonight on stage!"

The Count Lecter dips his head, a subtle smile upon his lips. His husband scowls and leans back.

The whispers double, triple, quadruple. The program had promised a bewitching, beautiful, poignant story, a story that has defined the Opéra Populaire more than any production ever has – but this story, this history, with a singer who lived it married to the upstanding and regal Count Hannibal Lecter? It is known that Count Lecter's husband was an opera star, with a voice so sweet it could charm the very birds out of trees, but the Count's husband retired decades ago, and now lives a quiet, sedate life, rarely appearing at the sumptuous dinner parties the Count throws. They are, by all counts, respectable members of the nobility, with the Count's husband a faithful patron of the arts and animals and the Count himself a lauded member of the medical scene.

What happened, they whisper among themselves, that would have involved the Count and his husband?

The Count's husband turns his head towards the Count, and he must say something, for the Count's smile widens and he spreads his hands silently, as if pantomiming innocent. It does not appear to fool or appease the Count's husband, for his scowl grows even deeper and he slumps in his chair, like a child throwing a temper tantrum. The Count leans close to his husband, like a moth to flame, and presses his lips to his husband's cheek, planting kisses alongside the scar like a farmer plants roses in a garden row. He says something too, whispering into his husband's ear as though the whole world might be listening it, and whatever he says makes his husband's shoulders shake in a suppressed laugh – or perhaps in anger.

Either way, the Count raises his hand to the watching audience members and gives a short royal wave, acknowledging the manager's words, and smiles as though he is part of the play himself, even though only his husband once performed on stage.

With that acknowledge paid, the spotlight flicks off, abruptly as it had gone on, and the man bows and scampers off the stage. Now emboldened with a taste of the night to come, all eyes go to the curtain, ravenous as a thousand wolves, to watch the Phantom of the Opera.

The conductor raises his baton, and the overture begins.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Next up, we travel back in time to when Will asks his Angel to think of him and gets to meet his Angel of Music.

Think of Me/Angel of Music

Chapter Summary

Will asks his Angel to think of him and gets to meet his Angel of Music.

Chapter Notes

~Time travel time~ woot woot! We go back to see the Opera in its glory, including a mysterious Angel, a shy Will, and an old childhood friend.

Warning: What do I know about singing or operas or shows? NothingTM. Just so we're clear. I literally have the Phantom of the Opera Blu-Ray and just keep watching it over and over as a reference for the fic XD. That being said, it is 100% factual to the stage show that they are literally putting on a show called *Hannibal* in the beginning; I did not make that up and YES it made me laugh my butt off when I first saw the show.

Also I'm gonna do that thing where everyone on stage is played by a man, even if the role is for a woman, so Frederick and Will both wear a dress in this. Multiple dresses, in fact. Enjoy that imagery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The problem with large, full-scale, full-costume rehearsals, Will thinks grimly as the orchestra resets for the fifth time, is that they are a damn pain.

Certainly, a full scale and full costume rehearsal has its benefits. For example, it would be foolish indeed if the dancers and singers were unfamiliar with their costumes, especially when it came time for quick scene changes and equally hasty undressing in the back room. It also allows the managers to see the full display and judge whether certain numbers should be reduced or expanded given the stage size and company talent. And it gives everyone a sense of the pacing of the production, so everyone knows when best to sidle away for a snack or water and when it is important to be right next to stage for the next scene.

Unfortunately, it also means that the slightest interruption causes a full scale ruckus, and if there's anything Frederick is good at, it's adding to the commotion.

"Absolutely not!" Frederick is saying shrilly. "This is how it was done in rehearsal, and this is how it *must* be done on opening night!"

Will rolls his eyes and prays for patience. They haven't even gotten through half of the production, and with the way things are gotten, they might never reach the finale. They are professionals, of course, and Will knows that Madame Hobbs would tolerate nothing less than the best from her dancers, so it's likely the show will be fine, but a smooth rehearsal usually helps settle everyone's nerves.

After a few more heated exchanges between Frederick and the manager, they finally come to some sort of agreement. That, or Franklyn manages to finally calm Frederick down.

Either way, Madam Hobbs taps her staff, the muted *thunk* that every dancer is attuned to as the earth is attuned to the sun, and Will and the rest of the dancers rush to their feet and hurry to their positions. They're in the middle of welcoming Hannibal, played by Frederick, back to Catharge with his lover, but Will tunes out most of the singing. He knows it all by heart, after all.

With pointed toes, graceful arms, beatific smile, Will settles right back into the dance, letting years of dancing practice guide his arms and legs. He glances at Madame Hobbs from time to time, but she doesn't glare at him, so he knows he is doing something right, at least.

When the chorus comes, Will adds his voice to it without hesitation. He much prefers the chorus, because then no one is looking only at him, even though he knows the Angel might disagree.

"Hear the drums," they sing, loud and perfectly in sync, "Hannibal comes!"

The dancers freeze, the orchestra pauses, and everybody lifts their arms and faces towards the middle of the stage. Franklyn enters, clad from head to toe in rich reds and greens and golds, a large sword belted to his waist and a feather-topped helmet balanced on his head, hands raised like he is truly the masterful conquering come home. Will'll give him this; for all of his nervous affect, Franklyn knows how to make an entrance and let the moment build.

"Sad to return to find the land we love," he sings, "threatened once more by Rome's far-reaching grasp. Tomorrow we shall break the wheels of Rome – "

Will is already wincing before the repetiteur interrupts, because he knows the production forwards and backwards – the Angel insisted, quite vehemently – and sure enough the repetiteur bursts onto stage yelling "No, no, no!"

Frederick rounds on him, aggravation in every line of his body. "What now?"

"*Chains* of Rome," the repetiteur exclaims, stabbing the line in his book as though he would like to stab Frederick instead. "Tomorrow we shall break the chains of Rome! Monsieur, please!"

"Wheels, strings, the meaning is the same," Franklyn protests.

"All the same, I must insist – "

And from there it devolves into another argument. As soon as Madame Hobbs relaxes her arms, every dancer relaxes as well, for they all know that they'll be once again having to start from the beginning until Frederick calms down, and he's already quite worked up. Will catches Beverly's eye from across the stage, expecting to see frustration equal to his own, and is surprised to see her deliberately break eye contact and look past Will instead of rolling her eyes like he is. He turns his head, ever so slightly, and realizes just why all of the dancers on the other side of the stage are staring when he catches sight of the three men slowly approaching the stage.

Frederick and the repetiteur are furiously discussing something, and so Will is not able to hear the three men until they are closer to the stage. The first he recognizes, for he would know the voice of Monsieur Stammets anywhere, but the other two he does not.

Finally, as they reach the stage, Frederick and Franklyn realize that Monsieur Stammets has come, and Frederick immediately pastes a sickly smile on.

"Rehearsals, as you see, are under way, for a new production of Chalumeau's *Hannibal*," Monsieur Stammets is saying as they climb the stairs. "We take a particular pride here in the excellence of our ballets. Over there stands our long reigning tenor, Signor Franklyn Froideveaux."

Franklyn dips his head, smiling nervously and shuffling, but the two gentlemen's eyes go straight to Frederick, and Will can see how Franklyn wilts.

"And, of course, our pride and joy, the star of the Opera Populaire," Monsieur Stammets says, sweeping towards Frederick with a flourish, "our very own Signor Frederick Chilton."

Frederick dips into a short bow, clearly basking in the attention, and Will can see the excited looks the two gentleman trade. Frederick has been the star for a while, so it makes sense that they know who he is, but Will knows all too well the kind of show Frederick can put on afterwards, and he has to turn away to hide his smirk at the idea of these two men's dreams of the perfect ideal of Frederick being dashed.

"Now then!" Monsieur Stammets says. "As you know, for some weeks there have been rumors of my imminent retirement. I can now tell you that these rumors were all true and it is my pleasure to introduce to you the two gentlemen who now own the Opera Populaire: Monsieur Jimmy Price and Monsieur Brian Zeller."

Whispers immediately spring up through the crowd. There have been rumors, of course, but these rumors had been swirling for so long that Will had honestly laughed them off, because there are also rumors that Madame Hobbs bathes in the blood of young virgins and Franklyn makes cheese in his dressing room, and mostly, they are just fanciful stories that roam the minds of new dancers and singings in the opera.

As Will watches, Monsieur Stammets turns to Price and Zeller and murmurs, almost under his breath, "And now that that's out of the way, I don't mind confessing that I shan't be sorry to be rid of the whole blessed business."

Price and Zeller trade a look at that, one that Will cannot decipher, but they appear to take Stammets at face value – or, at least, decide they came away with the better end of the bargain. Price breaks away from the trio and approaches Frederick, stars in his eyes, and Frederick delicately takes his offered hand when he gets close.

“I have experienced all your greatest roles, Signor,” Price breathes. “Truly, it is an honor and a very happy accident.”

“You flatter me,” Frederick says coyly.

“If I remember rightly, you will have a rather fine aria in Act Three of *Hannibal*. I wonder, Signor, if, as a personal favor, you would oblige us with a private . . . rendition?”

It’s certainly not the first time Will has heard someone ask such a thing of Frederick, but Frederick usually rejects the request unless he can get something good out of it. That being said, being on the good side of the new owners is something Frederick seems to judge as worth it, for he bats his eyes and says, “As my manager commands. Maestro?”

All at once, everything comes alive. Madame Hobbs taps her cane, sharp and short, and all the dancers immediately jump to their feet and rush to the edge. To an outsider, it would appear to be a disorganized mass of people, but every dancer knows where to put their feet, and so even though Price and Zeller wince as though they expect they’ll be trampled, Will and the rest of the dancers stream past them and settle at the edge of the stage, so that Frederick can have the full stage – and room – to himself.

Franklyn rushes up to give Frederick a long scarf, threaded with golds and greens and reds, a complement to his fine red and golden clothes, and Frederick yanks it out of his hands and drapes it casually over his arms. He makes a striking sight, to be sure, as he poses himself just so under the bright lights and waits.

Will knows every song in this opera by heart. They have been practicing for weeks, of course, so he knows which step goes with which beat, but beyond that, his Angel decreed that this play would be a fine way to hone his skills, and so every night when Will would trudge into his room, feet sore and legs trembling and arms twitching, he would lift his voice in song at his Angel’s command. It has gotten to the point where Will can sing each song almost without thinking, each word melding together with the ritual of undressing and twirling through his room with graceful steps to undress and slide into bed. So as Frederick opens his mouth and begins to sing, Will closes his eyes and hums along, for it was only last night that he practiced this same aria over and over and over until he passed out between one word and the next and awoke tucked neatly into bed, the blanket draped carefully over his shoulders, his head upon the pillow, his shoes off of his feet and nestled in his cubby.

Will is, in fact, so lost in his memory of the rendition that he misses the moment when everything changes. Or rather, his eyes miss it.

His ears do not, for Frederick’s bloodcurling scream and the heavy crash of ropes and fabric are hard to miss.

Will snaps his eyes open and gasps, for Frederick is facedown on the floor, beating at the stage with his fists and legs like a child, yelling at the top of his lungs. Franklyn and some of the stage hands are struggling to lift one of the giant backdrops from Frederick, shifting it off in starts and stops, and the new owners are standing there with their mouths agape.

“Sutcliffe!” Franklyn yells. “Sutcliffe, what are you doing?!”

There’s a harsh clattering of footsteps, and Sutcliffe appears at the edge of a railing. He’s covered in dust, as usual, but although he’s usually the culprit behind most pranks, Will knows he would never do this kind of thing to Fredrick of all people. Besides, it would mean loads more work for him to fix it.

Sutcliffe raises a hand to his breast. “God as my witness, I did not do it,” he rasps. “I wasn’t at my post.”

“Well, then who did do it?!”

Sutcliffe laughs, harsh and wheezing. “Must’ve been a ghost, then, I suppose,” he cackles, and melts back into the shadows. Sometimes Will thinks Sutcliff is a ghost himself, with the way he can appear and disappear from shadows.

Beverly leans into Will and nudges his shoulder. “It’s him, isn’t it?” she whispers. “The Phantom of the Opera.”

And the problem with Bev is, well. When she whispers, it *carries*.

The words begin to spread, like embers alighting upon the wind, and Will can see the way dancers and stage hands and everyone else huddling together, wary eyes darting up and around, their mouths forming the words *the Phantom is here*, until the whole stage vibrates with the same four words.

Stammets looks at Bev, looks at the new owners, and grins, wide and unrepressed like a giant burden has been lifted from his shoulder. “And on that note, if you gentlemen need me, I shall be living at a mushroom farm. Far, far away from here. Good day!” he calls cheerily, as he makes a hasty exit.

Zeller reaches out, as if to try and stop Stammets, but Price swallows hard. Will can clearly see him trying to put on a face, whether it is just to be calm or trying to be what he thinks a manager should be. Either way, he strides forward as the stage hands finally get the backdrop off of Frederick and extends a courteous hand to lift him to his feet, allowing Frederick’s frantic fussing over his clothes and makeup and skin, murmuring words of reassurance and praise.

Or, well, trying to murmur reassurance, because whatever he says makes Frederick swell like a toad.

“These things happen?” Frederick says, loud and echoing, pulling his hand out of Price’s like he’s turned into a snake. “*These things happen?*”

“Accidents do happen,” Price says, swallowing hard and clearly nervous, aware that everyone has stopped and is looking at them, most of them with exasperation or knowing resignation. “Don’t worry, Signor Chilton, I’m sure we can get this fixed quite easily and – ”

“Accidents!” Frederick shrieks, poking Price in the chest with each word. “Well as long as these *accidents* happen, my happy accident will not!”

Declaration made, Frederick flounces off the stage, head held high and words echoing around the hall. Franklyn looks at Frederick, the new owners, and then back at Frederick, wringing his hands, before he sides – as usual – with Frederick. He wags a disapproving finger at Price and Zeller and then rushes off after his diva, casting his helmet and sword props aside as further insult.

Will and Beverly snicker into their hands at the dumbfounded looks upon Price and Zeller’s faces. On one hand, better for them to learn early the price of having a high-tempered diva as their star. On the other hand, well, seeing as they clearly have no experience with managing an opera house, Will acknowledges it’s a tad cruel, seeing as most of their new employees are visibly amused at their discomfort. But well, he’ll take his amusement where he can get it, seeing as eventually Price and Zeller will likely learn that the quickest way to stop the dancers from giggling is to yell. Or unleash Madame Hobbs on them.

Price and Zeller lean their heads together, whispering furiously, and then Price straightens.

“It will be alright,” he calls, clearly aiming for calm and forceful, even though his voice cracks in the middle. “Signor Chilton will be back.”

Madame Hobbs steps forward. She doesn’t make a single sound, because every movement is perfectly balanced and she only makes sound to command others, but dressed head to toe in all black, she is equally striking, and Price and Zeller turn to her as she approaches.

“I have a message, good sirs, from the Phantom himself,” she says.

Zeller rolls his eyes skyward, sighing. “Good God in Heaven,” he complains, finally speaking for the first time. Will can tell that unlike Price, he is far less enamored with opera – a man of science, probably as opposed to the arts. “You’re all obsessed!”

Madame Hobbs doesn’t blink at the insult. Will has heard rumors that Madame Hobbs acts more as the Phantom’s right hand than the owner’s or the manager’s, and he believes it, for whenever something happens regarding the Phantom, Madame Hobbs is always there, always watching, with an edge of amusement and hidden knowledge. He has even heard wilder, darker rumors as to why.

“The Phantom merely welcomes you to his opera house,” Madame Hobbs says, the very air of hospitality and congeniality.

“His opera house?” Zeller squawks indignantly.

Madame Hobbs continues unbothered. “He also commands you to continue to leave Box empty for his private use – ”

“His private use?” Price yelps.

“ – and reminds you that his salary is due,” Madame Hobbs finishes with a flourish.

“His *salary*?!” Price and Zeller squeak in tandem, voices high and unbelieving, as though they are being told that they have come without trousers and everyone can see their bare skin when they clearly took such care to dress well for their introduction today, an introduction which is going admittedly not very well.

Madame Hobbs smiles thinly. No owner has ever dared to let her go, and part of the reason is that smile. “Monsieur Stammets paid him thirty thousand francs a month,” she says, before she pauses to deliver the final blow. “Perhaps you can afford more, with the Vicomte de Verger as your patron.”

Will’s breathing halts without his permission. He never forgets a name, as quickly picking up and remembering things was drilled into him when young, but the Verger name rings a bell old and worn in his chest, with memories of glittering parties and dances that went until the sun peaked back over the horizon and feasts that covered dozens of tables. Will hasn’t thought about that name and that time in so long, and then it gets worse when he hears the next words from Madame Hobbs.

“Will the Vicomte be at tonight’s performance?”

Zeller narrows his eyes, as if he senses a trap. He’s learning. “In *our* box,” he snaps.

Will has to turn away. He can’t imagine seeing the Vicomte again. Or the Vicomte’s sister. Or –

“Will Graham could sing it, sir,” Beverly says suddenly, loud in Will’s hear, scattering all the dusty ghosts of Will’s childhood. He looks at her, utterly bewildered, before he realizes that it’s not just Beverly looking at him – everyone is. Even Price and Zeller are.

“A dancer?” Price says skeptically. “Is he even part of the chorus?”

“He’s been taking lessons,” Beverly chirps, and Will immediately regrets giving into her and whispering a short tale of why he seems so tired in the morning after long practices. “From a very great teacher.”

“And who is this . . . great teacher?”

With all eyes upon him, Will swallows hard. There’s a reason he prefers blending into the sea of dancers, and it’s just because it’s easier to turn off his mind and smile vacantly as his feet weave across the floor. He opens his mouth and tries to speak, but no words emerge.

After all, the Angel was *very* clear what would happen if Will revealed him to anyone.

“Well come on, out with it,” Zeller snaps impatiently. He looks ready to turn around and sell the opera house again right then and there, which does not help Will at all.

“I,” he stammers, “I don’t, I don’t know, sir.”

Before Price or Zeller can speak again, Madame Hobbs thumps her staff down, and the whole company falls silent. She turns to Price and Zeller, face serious for the first time in the entire conversation, and nudges Will forward with a hand on his shoulder like a mother presenting their first child to the court for their coming of age.

“Let him sing for you, monsieur,” Madame Hobbs says. “He has been very well taught.”

Will thinks of those old, wild, dark rumors of why Madame Hobbs is so loyal to the Phantom of the Opera, and swallows hard. But she is retreating almost as fast as she emerged, leaving Will in the front of the stage with the whole company staring at him, nothing to protect himself with besides a measly prop scarf.

Will looks down at the scarf, faded and muted, barely green and red anymore, about as show-ready as he feels right now, and takes a deep breath.

The words and the music come easily to Will, after so many days practicing, but it’s one thing to sing to his Angel in his tiny bedroom and quite another to sing to an entire company in the giant opera hall. He can tell his voice isn’t strong or loud enough to fill the hall, but where usually the Angel would be there to gift him encouragement or correction, right now there is only silence and judgment, and Will falters. He remembers the accusing stares of those who thought he would be like his father, a violinist without rival, only for his talents to lie in song and dance, and now, seeing Price and Zeller watching him with skepticism, he breaks, as he once broke and fled in tears from the Vicomte’s house.

Only this time, when he cuts off and turns to flee, he is not greeted by the cool embrace of darkness to swallow his sins, but by the hard eyed statute of Madame Hobbs, who thumps her cane down and refuses to let him leave.

Oddly enough, with his escape cut off, Will settles a little. It feels a lot like when he first met the Angel, when the Angel first demonstrated his heavenly powers to shut Will’s door and cut off all route of escape, where he first commanded Will to sing for him, where he first revealed himself to Will as a silky voice in the darkness. Will closes his eyes, remembers how he learned to sing under the Angel’s tutelage, and clutches the scarf in his hands like he once clutched at his blankets.

This time, he opens his mouth, and he *sings* until the opera hall vibrates from the echoes of his words, so that even the Angel in heaven can hear him.

Will is never sure what, exactly, they tell Frederick, but he spends the next few hours getting constantly harassed, by the seamstresses fixing the costumes to fit him and the painters trying to capture his likeness for new promotional material and the stage manager trying to cram an entire show in his head. Even the owners bother him a few times, although they seem mollified after a quick exchange – “Graham, is it? No relation to the famous violinist Theodore Graham?” “My father, sir.” “Ah, I see.” – and, of course, after Will flattened them all in the opera hall, there is no protest that they will get a singer immediately instead of spending time begging favor from Frederick.

Will, who as a dancer has largely gone unnoticed by everyone besides Madame Hobbs, finds it rather stifling. And they don't even allow him to go back to his room or the tiny chapel, so he cannot even speak to his Angel.

Instead, he is shoved onto the stage to sing, and with each passing song, he is ever more grateful for the Angel.

So he sings, loud and clear and vibrant, just like the Angel taught him, and he hopes that his father and all the Angels can hear him in Heaven, so that his father will know that his guardian angel has fulfilled the promise – and that Will is always thinking of him.

Will has always appreciated the way the opera hall makes the music and the singing echo, for it reminds him of his childhood, with his father playing sweet tunes for him to fall asleep with. Yet now he also appreciates how it reflects and echoes the applause and cheers of the audience, for when he sings his final note and bows, chest heaving with relief at finishing a flawless show, the applause slams into him like a tidal wave, almost deafening him. It's undeniable that they enjoyed the show, that they enjoyed *Will*, and that thought makes Will feel like he's floating on clouds.

He can almost understand, now, why Frederick loves being the diva. If Will could receive a thunderous applause every night for years, he might literally float off stage.

His fellow dancers ambush him the second he steps off stage, after the curtain falls. They touch his glittering tiara and brush their hands against his sumptuous dress, eyes and voices filled with envy and stars, and Will giggles with them because for once he feels utterly at peace, uninhibited, free. For once, he feels like the star his father promised Madame Hobbs in between bloody coughs that Will would be.

He's so caught up in their gossip and giggling that he doesn't even notice Madame Hobbs approaching until she thumps her cane against the floor, freezing everyone in place like magic. She eyes them, face creased with disapproval, but the creases clear like clouds in the sky when she sees Will clutching nervously at his dress.

She steps forward, straightening his collar, and says, "Yes, you did well. Very well indeed." She pauses and tilts her head, the corner of her mouth turned up. "*He* will be pleased."

Will has to duck his head at that. He had hoped, of course, but it's one thing to hope and another to hear praise from Madame Hobbs, who would usually sooner drink poison than tell them they did well. She has very high standards, after all.

Sure enough, she turns on the other dancers immediately, with the strict scolding Will remembers all too well. "And you! You were a *disgrace*," she snaps. "We rehearse *now*."

Will almost moves to join them on instinct, for after so many rehearsals he remembers each step as well as he knows his own name, but Madame Hobbs catches his arm with her hand and steers him away, and he remembers that, oh yes, he is a dancer no longer. He is a singer, a diva and a star, and there are no rehearsals for him. Now, it is time for him to change, and relax, and see if anyone has sent him roses.

Will floats away, still pinching himself, and takes the long, winding path to his room. They had offered him a better one, of course, befitting of his status as the new star, but Will had refused, telling them that it would be better not to count their shows before they were sold.

It's partially the truth, of course.

Will steps in his bedroom, breathing a huge sigh of relief, and opens his mouth to call the Angel to him –

"Well, well," Beverly says, popping up behind Will with a huge grin on her face and laughing as he stumbles, "where in the world have you been hiding that voice, Graham? You were perfect. Your tutor must be really something."

"He's an Angel," Will says seriously, because Beverly is not religious and it's an easy way to distract her. "My father told me he would send me an Angel on his deathbed, to teach me what he could not. He kept his promise."

Beverly looks him up and down, raises her eyebrow, and crosses her arms. "You sure you didn't just . . . dream that? I thought you said your father passed away quite suddenly."

"Well, it was sudden. And so was my Angel of music appearing." Will twirls as he speaks, admiring the glittering of the gown. He'll have to take it all off, soon, but for now he just admires being in fine, beautiful clothing for once.

"Graham, you really need your head checked," Beverly sighs, but she also steps into the room and helps to start unfastening his dress, so Will takes it for the affectionate jab it probably was.

They only get halfway through before Madame Hobbs comes looking for Beverly and sends her off to join the other dancers in rehearsal, but she also brings a maid to help finish the process, so in short order, Will is free from the heavy, sumptuous dress and able to breath for what feels like the first time in the entire day. He wraps his worn, well-used dressing gown around him and slides his feet into his slippers and heads to his desk. He had spotted a single red rose there, but he hadn't wanted to draw attention with Beverly there.

Now, though, alone, he pads to his desk and picks up the rose. It is freshly cut, petals soft as a baby's breath, thorns still attached, a single black ribbon wound in a neat yet complicated bow on the stem.

Will holds the flower to his face, breathing in the sweet scent, and smiles. He needs no dressing room overflowing with bouquets when he can get this gift from his Angel.

Someone knocks two times on his door, firm and polite raps, and Will frowns. His fellow dancers used to barge in all the time, especially Beverly, and Madame Hobbs would knock only once before entering. He can't think of who might visit him, though, as he knows no one outside of the company, and one show is hardly enough to bring in any backstage admirers. Will stows the rose away, careful not to bruise the delicate petals, and calls out, "Enter?"

The door opens slowly, revealing a tall man with dark skin and fine clothes. He carries a bottle of what looks like champagne in one hand and a beautiful bouquet of fine red roses in other, and Will can just about make out the sight of Price and Zeller sneaking back down the hallway.

Will stands. “Can I help you, Monsieur?”

The man grins, wide and boyish, and says, “Will Graham, where is your hat?”

Will blinks. He’d worn mostly crowns and tiaras throughout the show, and a gentleman who dresses like that surely is well aware that it’s mostly stage jewelry that dancers wear. There’s a reason why many seek patrons; Frederick has several, as far as Will knows. “I’m sorry?”

“You can’t have just lost it,” the man says, still grinning. “After all the trouble I took to get it back. I had barely turned sixteen, do you remember? Middle of the big party and I was soaked to the skin – ”

And, well, Will hasn’t worn a hat in years, but he did used to wear one during the big parties his father entertained for, because his curls could never be tamed and to hide his face. And one time, one very embarrassing time, another boy had stolen that hat and thrown it into the sea, and another boy had raced in to get it back, and that boy had been –

“Tobias!” Will exclaims. Now that Tobias has come closer, circling with slow steps like he is wading in shallow waters, Will can make out the resemblance, see where Tobias’s boyish cheeks filled out, where his shoulders broadened, where his growth spurt hit and sent him towering up over Will, as once upon a time Will had always been taller. “You dove in to fetch my hat without even taking off your shoes! Everyone was afraid you were going to catch a cold.”

Tobias beams, setting down the champagne. “It’s so good to see you again, Will,” he says, voice thick with affection. He proffers the bouquet of roses, and Will can tell that they aren’t cheap either. Clearly, Tobias has done better at climbing the social ladder than Will has.

“These are lovey, thank you,” Will tells him sincerely. “And you look so sharp, Tobias!”

Tobias pats at his suit, as if it’s nothing and not something that Will imagines wouldn’t look out of place on the Vicomte himself. “My father took over entertaining for the Vicomte de Verger, after your father passed,” Tobias explains. “We earned enough to open our own little shop. Best catgut strings in all of Paris. And whenever the Vicomte wishes to throw a party, he pays very generously for my time.”

Will has to smile at that. Will’s father had helped teach Tobias’s father, once upon a time, and while Tobias’s father hadn’t been as skilled at music, Will remembers that Tobias had taken an interest in the construction of instruments, and clearly he’s done quite well with that knowledge. Tobias and Will had used to spend days together as their father practiced. In many ways, Tobias was his first friend, because while they sometimes played with the Vicomte’s children, Will would never dare presume to call Mason and Margot his friends.

Tobias seems to be remembering the good old days too, but then a shadow passes over his face. “I heard about your father’s death. I was so sorry to hear of your loss. I wish we could have been there.”

“There’s no way you could have known,” Will says. “He didn’t want anyone to know.”

“He didn’t tell anyone that he was placing you with the Opéra Populaire, either,” Tobias says, a faint hint of reproach in his voice. “We would have taken you in, Will.”

Will shrugs. Honestly, he had never thought of seeking Tobias and his father out, because his father had said the Opéra Populaire was the place for him, a place that keep him fed and educated and sheltered. It had been grueling, getting used to the dancing in the beginning, but Will had been young and had adjusted. He can’t deny he’s led a relatively comfortable life under with the opera house.

“I didn’t mind,” Will tells him. “Besides, Father said that when he went to Heaven, he would send an Angel here to finish my teaching in his place, and he has. I’m happy here, Tobias.”

“You are indeed glowing,” Tobias compliments. He grins again, like he’s had the best idea. “And now we should go to supper! My treat. We have so much to catch up on.”

Will hesitates. On one hand, he would certainly love to hear what Tobias has gotten up to, and maybe even see his shop. But on the other hand, the Angel has been very clear what would cause him to have to return to Heaven, and missing a session with him was one of those conditions. Will is sure that tonight of all nights, after his first real performance, the Angel will have many things to say before tomorrow’s performance.

So instead he says, “No, Tobias, I must refuse. The Angel that Father sent is well. Very strict.”

“Well, I shan’t keep you up late! I know you must be well rested for tomorrow, and I do intend to applaud your amazing performance then too. Just one supper, Will. Let me treat you.”

“Tobias – ”

“It’ll be my treat, so it’s settled,” Tobias interrupts, clearly already picturing where to go and what to order. “Let me get my hat while you change. I’ll be back in two minutes, Will!”

“Tobias!” Will calls after him, but it’s a fruitless endeavor. Tobias is practically running down the hallway, as energetic and headstrong as he had been in his youth. Clearly, some things in Tobias haven’t changed.

But others . . .

Will looks at the bouquet he still holds. It’s lovely, but Will no longer feels the warm rush of affection when he holds it. Mostly he feels cold, chilled to the bone, and he quickly drops the bouquet onto his desk. He would get rid of it, if he could, but if he put it in the trash he would

get questioned by Beverly – or worse, the new owners – and they've already demonstrated they have no reverence for the Angel.

Will just hopes the Angel will understand.

It's hard to describe, how Will knows the Angel is coming. The first time, Will had sensed some strange in the air – like lightning, perhaps, in the moment before it strikes – but he had not known what it was, and so he had been frightened. Now that he knows, he is still slightly scared, but this is a different fear, because Will's fear is not a stranger coming to smother him in his sleep in his new home anymore, but a fear of the Angel's wrath . . . or his return to Heaven.

"What an insolent boy!" the Angel rages, voice echoing about the room. "Ignorant fool, attempting to bask in your glory! If there is one thing I do not abide, it is rudeness to this degree."

And, well, Will has seen what the Angel does to rude people. He could have killed Frederick, if he hadn't just been playing a game with him.

So Will pleads with him, because he doesn't want to see Tobias turn up dead by sunrise. "Angel, please, forgive me, I was weak," he implores. "Please speak, so that I may listen! Please teach me, so that I may learn!"

There is silence, for a moment. The Angel has never been truly angry with Will, and Will isn't even sure if his guardian angel *can* get angry at him. Yet Will is not stupid enough to think that his Angel is fooled by Will taking on the blame, when he is so angry at Tobias and clearly wants to vent his power against Tobias.

"Please stay by my side and guide me," Will begs. He can't imagine being the new star without his Angel to help him, even if Will has to stay cooped up in this tiny room for the rest of his life. Honestly, he'd probably prefer that over having to socialize.

When the Angel's voice comes again, it is calmer, like waves recovering after a surge from a storm. "Flattering boy," the Angel says, a hint of affection in his voice, the rage subsiding like tides flowing back out to the ocean as the moon recedes. "Perhaps it is time for you to walk at my side, to know me, to see why I hide in the shadow."

Will blinks. From all the stories he was told, looking upon the face of an angel can kill, if it doesn't blind or harm someone. He would love to meet his Angel, but to see him? "Are you – Are you bidding me farewell?" Will asks, unable to keep the fear and sadness out of his tone.

"No, I am bidding you hello," the Angel responds. "Go to the mirror, Will. Take a good look at your face. You might see someone else inside."

Will frowns, but he rises and goes to his mirror as the Angel says. In the beginning, he rarely understood the point of the exercises the Angel bid him to perform, and yet now he understands that they were to strengthen his lungs and legs and arms, to make him a better singer and dancer. And it is hardly a difficult request to look at his mirror.

Will usually doesn't look at himself in the mirror, mostly because he's nothing special and every dancer dresses in the same costume, so they help each other out to make sure they're properly attired. Right now, he sees nothing out of the ordinary, just himself – slim and pink-cheeked and tousled curls, clad in a white dressing gown, ruffled sleeves and well worn shoes.

But then he looks closer, and realizes there are actually two faces in the mirror: his own, and another, tall and dark, like the half moon.

The Angel.

"Angel," Will breathes, and places his fingers upon the mirror. "Will you grant me the glory of seeing you?"

"Come to me," the Angel whispers. Fingers, hand, a wrist, they appear out of the darkness, beckoning Will forward. "Come to me, for I am your Angel of Music, and it is time for you to see me, Will."

Will presses against the mirror, hope alighting in his breast, and cannot stop the gasp when the mirror suddenly *moves*, sinking inward like a trapdoor. As Will puts more pressure, it sinks faster, until at last something gives and the whole side of the mirror swings inward, revealing a dark tunnel, a dusty floor, and a being that stands in the distance, shrouded in darkness. All Will can see, vaguely, is an outstretched hand and half of a face.

Not the usual depiction of angels Will sees in chapels and churches, but who is he to question how his guardian angel appears to him?

Will reaches out and takes his Angel's hand. It is warm and solid and reassuring, and despite the dark tunnel, Will feels like he is once again alive, the chill of Tobias and Franklyn and the stress of the show melting away from him. All that matters is his Angel, and his Angel's guidance, and his Angel's approval.

"Hello, my Angel of Music," Will says.

"Hello," the Angel replies as the mirror closes behind them, "my Will."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Next up, the Phantom of the Opera reveals his true self and the music of the night.

Phantom of the Opera/Music of the Night

Chapter Summary

> The Angel of Music reveals his connection to the Phantom of the Opera and begins the plot to play the music of the night.

Chapter Notes

> Still know nothing about opera or music or plays. Still relying, in fact, totally upon watching and rewatching the 25th anniversary showing at the Royal Albert Hall. And still putting Will in dresses.
>
> Also Shatou made some GORGEOUS Hannibunnies for a scene in this chapter!!! Check it out here for all the assorted links <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will isn't sure how long they walk in the darkness. They are hand in hand, footsteps perfectly matched, breathing patterns aligned, almost as if they are one person and not two, and Will catches himself looking at his Angel from time to time, just to be sure that there is someone actually there and not just his own imagining.

The third time it happens, his Angel notices. "Is something the matter, my dear?" His voice echoes in the darkness, low and dark, and it sends shivers up Will's spine.

"No," Will says immediately. "No, of course not."

His Angel seems to not believe him; perhaps he spoke too quickly. "If you would like to return to your room – "

"No!" Will says, louder this time, so that it bounces down the tunnel, like a chorus of denial. "No, please. Don't leave me."

His Angel comes to a stop. Will can barely see him in the darkness, but he can hear him – he can hear the swish of cloth, the intake of breath, the press of shoes against stone, and so he is not surprised when his Angel's other hand grasps his and the Angel's voice comes from in front of him instead of beside him. To his face, his Angel purrs, "Don't worry, my dear Will. I would never leave you."

“Good,” Will breathes, looking upwards to where he can just barely make out the glimmer of a pale face.

The face moves, and Will feels the gentlest kiss against his hand. It is a strange feeling – half cold, hard and unyielding, and half warm, soft and pliable. The coldness reminds Will of the masks the actors wear, sometimes, for masquerades or plays, although he cannot think of one that bares half of the mouth. Usually the masks cover the whole face, or the upper half with the eyes.

Then again, those are masks for humans. What can be said about how an angel wears a mask?

“Ah, but where are my manners?” his Angel says. “I should not let my brave star languish in the darkness; you have toiled there long enough. Let me see you, my darling, and let you gaze upon me, so there is no doubt between us.”

The Angel releases his hands, and Will stands frozen in the darkness. He should not doubt his Angel, for he has done all he promised and more, but some small animal part of Will cannot help but wonder if perhaps he has been played for a fool, if this is no Angel at all, if Will has danced to the whims of a devil and now he must pay the price here in this cold, dark tunnel, alone and afraid. If he will die here, torn apart and devoured, his bones left as a warning for the next child who hums to himself in the darkness of night in the corridors as he scrubs the floors and thinks that the voice who calls to him within the walls is an angel come from heaven.

Yet the thought has barely crossed his mind when he hears the beautiful sound of a match being struck. A tiny orange flame, like a little sun, comes into being, and it bobbles up and down before it blooms into a beautiful glow as his Angel lights a lamp.

It is actually a tad overwhelming, after so long in the dark; Will shies away, a hand over his face, half out of fear and half out of pain.

But his Angel – his patient, wonderful, guiding light – his Angel approaches him with calm acceptance, and takes his hand, and lifts the lamp so that it shines across their faces.

“Look at me, Will,” his Angel coaxes. “See for yourself; I am no monster, waiting to devour you whole. I am here, and whole, and no devil.”

Slowly, cautiously, Will lowers his hand and raises his gaze from the floor. He finds that his Angel is dressed almost entirely in black, a fine cut suit that hugs his body as though it was sewn onto him. It would not, Will thinks, look out of place at some of the fine events Will’s father used to entertain for. The suit is high-collared, covering most of his Angel’s neck, but it does nothing to cover up the strong cut of his Angel’s jaw, so sharp Will half thinks he could cut his hand upon it.

Then he looks up, and beholds his Angel’s face for the first time, and is struck anew as speechless as he was when the Angel first sung to him, all those years ago, like a siren in the walls.

Half of his Angel's face is covered in a white mask, as form-fitting as his suit. It is a strange mask, for it gleams dully in the light, as though it is porcelain or some other fine material, and strangest of all, there is no cut out for the eye, only a slight depression to indicate where the eye might be.

The other half of his Angel's face, though, is visible and wonderfully human. He has lips, which are curved into a slight smile; he has cheekbones, sharp and angled like a knife; and he has an eye, fixed straight at Will, although Will cannot determine the color. He is handsome and regal, like a prince out of a fairytale, from his shiny shoes to his top hat, and Will's breath catches in his throat.

His Angel seems similarly affected by the sight of Will, although Will isn't really sure why. "My Will," his Angel murmurs, even lower than before. "How lovely you are. I am so glad you sang for me, this night."

Out of the corner of his eye, Will sees his Angel raise one hand towards his face; it is trembling, ever so slightly, but it settles when his Angel places it against Will's face, cupping his cheek and brushing at his hair. His hand is warm and large and strong, and Will gives into the urge to lean into it like a cat.

"I have always sung for you," Will tells him. "Every note, every word – it has been for you. Surely you have seen?"

"I do now," his Angel tells him. "So come, then. We need not travel much further before you may rest your poor aching feet."

"This is nothing," Will laughs, even as he allows the Angel to move them forward again. "You used to have me dance from when the moon rose to when she set, and even then keep on going, until I dreamed each step in my sleep."

His Angel smiles. "Practice makes perfect."

"I wouldn't dream to call myself perfect."

"No, of course not," his Angel says, and squeezes his hand. "That would be my call to make."

The tunnel finally ceases to slope downwards, smoothing out into a plateau, so that Will no longer feels like he is a moment away from tripping and tumbling to his death. The stone beneath their feet is ancient and worn, so smooth Will can hardly feel the different pieces through his thin slippers. And now that there is light, Will can make out the sight of cobwebs and dust all over, as though this tunnel is hardly ever traveled. The opera house is enormous, of course, but this place gives Will the sense of something old and ancient and forbidding, as if this is sacred ground that the opera house was built on top of and then forgot about.

A fitting place, perhaps, for his Angel to dwell.

They pass underneath an archway, and Will halts in surprise, for there, hobbled to the wall, is a horse. The horse is not glamorous or majestic – it has no wings or golden bridle or such –

but it nickers at his Angel and seems friendly, at least.

“My faithful steed,” his Angel says, setting the lamp into a place on the wall and untying the horse. “Have you ever ridden before, my dear?”

“N – No,” Will stammers.

He has seen horses before, yes; the Vicomte had two whole stables of them, and the only thing he had been prouder of than his horses was his pigs. But riding a horse and seeing them gallop across the field are two very different things.

“She will not hurt you,” his Angel says soothingly. “Come – offer her your hand. Let her smell you. Yes. And touch her nose, here; feel how soft it is. Feel her breath against your skin. Feel her gentle heart.”

Will does so. The horse’s nose is indeed soft, like the finest velvet, and although she snorts when Will touches her, she does not appear angry. Rather, Will gets the sense that she is curious, like a dog deciding if a man is friend or foe. Either way, she loses interest in him after a few moments, and turns her head to lip at his Angel’s clothes.

“Behave, now,” his Angel tells her sternly. “We have a guest tonight.”

When his Angel leads forward, Will stares at the confusing array of buckles and straps, unsure where to grab, but his Angel merely comes to his side and *lifts* him into the saddle, as if he is a dainty maiden. It is awkward and strange, to have his seat snorting and shifting below him, and Will slides his leg over to try and get a better grip.

“There, see?” his Angel says, patting at the horse’s rump. “You’re a natural.”

Will doesn’t feel like a natural at all, so he just holds on tighter to the saddle. “Do you mean for me to guide her? I don’t know how.”

His Angel laughs. It echoes differently down here; Will gets the sense that this is a place where many tunnels meet, like the center of a giant maze. Still chuckling, his Angel grasps the saddle and fits his foot into one of the many loops and twists, heaving himself up behind Will.

“You speak like you think I will abandon you,” his Angel says, amused and warm into Will’s ear, like warm water poured down his spine. He rests a heavy hand against Will’s stomach and gathers up the reins with the other. “Don’t worry, Will; I will not abandon you. I am your guide, remember?”

“So where are we going?”

“To a place where I can truly hear you sing for you,” his Angel replies. “To see if you are ready.”

And then he kicks the horse into motion, and Will is too busy clutching at him to think of more questions to ask.

When the ride is over, his Angel pulling the horse to a quick stop, Will finds himself opening his mouth and asking if that is it. He can understand, now, why people pay exorbitant prices for horses and to ride horses. This horse is pretty, to be sure, but riding her felt like riding the wind, like flying, and Will regrets that the flight is over so soon.

“I see you are no longer afraid,” his Angel observes as he helps Will down. “Did you enjoy that?”

“It felt like flying,” Will confesses. He raises a tentative hand and brushes the horse’s long neck, and she buts her head against him playfully. “I can see why you love her.”

“She has carried me faithfully for many years, and without complaint,” his Angel remarks. “But no further; my home is not so easily conquered by a creature of the land. Are you afraid of water, my dear?”

Will thinks of the sea – salty and loud and windy, so powerful it had pulled Will’s hat clear off his head so that Tobias had to dive for it – and blushes. “No,” he says. “But oftentimes it has made a fool of me.”

“Don’t worry,” his Angel promises, extending a hand. “I have a boat.”

Will follows his Angel down some stairs, at the bottom of which lies a small dock. It is old and worn, like the stones of the path, and Will can see small holes where the slats have worn away or broken off. At the end of the dock is a small boat, barely large enough for two people. Unlike the dock, though, it seems new and well-kept, for it has a cushioned seat and two long paddles and a neat coil of rope attached firmly to the stern. If Will had seen the boat on the ocean, he would think it a rather fine boat, for the cushion is deep red and velvet, comfortable and lavish in a way only the rich can afford, and small, like a love boat for young paramours to gather and gossip and giggle, away from the prying eyes of family and friends.

His Angel insists that Will have the cushion at the head of the boat, like a true gentleman, and also insists that Will allow him to do the rowing.

The boat cuts smoothly through the water. There are some waves, but small ones, like the lake is a self-contained one, or perhaps man made one. Will risks a glance down to the waves, and finds that the water is as dark as the night sky during a new moon; he cannot possibly guess how deep it is, and he does not wish to find out.

He wonders, perhaps, if this is how his Angel disposes of those who displease him, and shivers at the thought of dying here and now, in the cold open water, with not even a ripple to betray his death.

“Are you cold?” his Angel asks solicitously. He is rowing, and so must be quite warm from the exercise, but mostly Will admires the strength of his arms and shoulders in perfect efficient harmony, pushing them through the water. “Of course; you have come to me with only a nightgown and slippers. Let me offer you my coat, my darling.”

“No need,” Will demurs. “You promised me it was a short journey.”

His Angel's teeth – or half of them – gleam in the darkness as he smiles. "A very short one, but I see that you are nervous all the same. Have I led you astray before?"

"No," Will says, but he finds himself still knotting at the seams in his nightgown. It is white and dainty and flimsy, perfect for sliding underneath the warm covers his bed, and under the cover of darkness he has nothing to fear – but his Angel has remarked multiple times that he wishes to truly see Will, and Will almost wishes he could have dressed in something more . . . appealing. Or at the very least more respectable. He can just imagine what Madame Hobbs might say, if she saw him venturing off into the company of a man – even a gentleman – in nothing but his night things.

His Angel hums. "Why don't you sing for me, my darling? It will take your mind off of things."

"And if I do not please you, will you throw me overboard to drown?" Will says, before he can stop himself.

His Angel stops rowing, as abruptly as though Will has struck him. Very slowly, he tilts his head, like a cobra lifting itself upwards and regarding its prey, determining how quickly it will need to strike. The smooth depression in the mask where an eye should be stares at Will like a blank-faced judge, weighing his words against his heart and seeing which tips the scales more, but his Angel's eye shows nothing but curiosity, as though he is Janus, flipping a coin to see which path he will take.

It is, perhaps, the first time Will feels the true power of his Angel, and understands why others might flee from his judgment.

Will is not sure how long they remain there, bobbing amongst the waves, while his Angel stares at him and Will stares back, wondering if he has just signed his death warrant. Finally, though, his Angel settles back and begins to row again.

"You are truly troubled indeed," his Angel says, but it is kindly said – or as kindly as his Angel can say it. Will gets the impression that it is more a comment on the turmoil and fear in Will's mind than the kind of whispered disapproval from those who looked down upon the orphan child of a musician. "Whatever gave you the impression that I intend to kill you, my dear?"

Will swallows hard. "This is where you . . . dispose of some of them. Isn't it?"

"Dispose of who?"

"The Phantom's victims. Those who . . . displease . . . you."

One eyebrow goes up on his Angel's face. "What need does an Angel have to concern himself with the petty human squabbles of an opera house?"

"What is to say the Phantom is human?" Will counters. "He appears and disappears, and no one knows who. No one knows what he looks as, and all reports are contrary. Some say he is

nothing but a fiery head of judgment that burns out your eyes if you see him. He is the guardian of the opera house, if nothing else."

"Guardian," his Angel breathes, as if he is tasting the word letter by letter, and unsure if the taste is to his liking. "Guardian, and not demon? Not ill spirit? Not monster?"

Will shakes his head, looking down. "You have only ever harmed those who harmed others, or who spoke ill of the opera house, or who threatened me."

"Are you sure?"

"Are you denying it?"

His Angel laughs quietly. "You are brave indeed, to try and outwit me. But you still have not answered my question, my darling. Whatever gave you the idea that I would kill you?"

Will lifts his chin and straightens his shoulders. If his Angel deems him unworthy, Will won't do him the disservice of fighting him, but that does not mean that Will cannot fight to live. His father taught him that. "Because you are letting me into your sanctuary," Will says, reveling in the faint spark of surprise in his Angel's eye. "You built this place of safety and fortitude, and you have allowed none inside but you; not even the steed which has always carried you and could never betray you. You cannot let me live, now, if you cannot bind me to you to prevent betrayal."

His Angel regards him in silence; the echoes of Will's words have long since been swallowed up into the waves of the water before he sighs and opens his mouth. Will waits, and wonders, and prays.

"But you are bound to me," his Angel purrs. "You're as bound to me as the moon is to the earth, as the night is to day, as the blooming rose is to the rising sun."

Will's heart races in his ear, almost as loud as his Angel's voice. He swallows, and says, "I could break the bond."

"And how would you do that?"

"However I needed to."

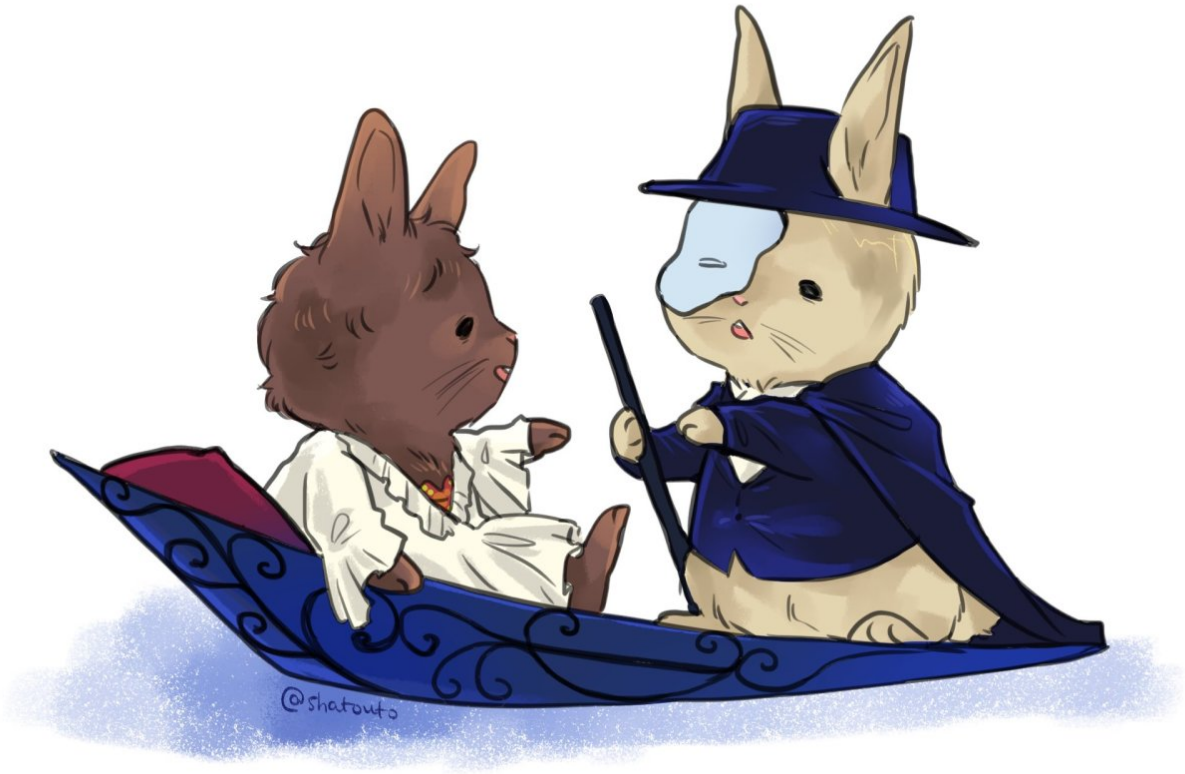
His Angel lazily runs an eye over Will, from his slipper-clad feet to his knotted hands to his bare shoulders where the dress has slipped, and smiles even wider. His answer has pleased the Angel, although Will is not sure why, or how. But either way, he feels surer now that ever than his Angel is dangerous, whether or not he dons the mask of the Phantom.

"You needn't worry," his Angel repeats, softly, like a man coaxing a cat to trust him. "I would not kill you, my darling. Not here, at least. If I were to end you, I would honor you fully, for you are a truly rare treasure. Few indeed would have the sight to know me as the true guardian of this house, as opposed to the monster devouring it from the inside."

Will's eyes go wide with shock. "Do you mean – "

“Sing for me,” his Angel commands, cutting him off. “Sing for me, my darling. I would see you, truly, without walls or curtains or people between us. Sing, and let your voice be known to mine ears; they are certainly more abundant than my eyes.”

Head pounding, heart racing, hands trembling, Will opens his mouth and does as his Angel commands: he *sings*.



Art by the lovely Shatou

Will is not sure how long he sings, or what he sings, or where they go. He focuses his gaze upon his Angel, and the world around them blurs – he blinks, and they are at the shore, his Angel offering him a gallant hand up; he blinks again, and they are outside a house, small but cozy and warmly lit; he blinks again, and his Angel is carrying him, like a bride on her wedding night, effortless and strong, to a place that is warm and soft and dark.

And then he blinks again, and finds that he is scrubbing away sleep from his eyes and pushing thick blankets from his legs, yawning as though he has slept the whole night away – or perhaps the whole week.

Will finds that he is in a bed now, large enough to fit six people and sumptuous enough for a king. The sheets feel as fine as newly spun silk, the mattress as soft as clouds, and the pillows are so richly decorated Will almost feels embarrassed that he disturbed them with his head. His Angel must have carried him, like a child, and removed his slippers, even, for his toes curl freely against the sheets.

When he finally pushes free of the sheets and looks around, he realizes that he is in a small room; it is barely larger than the room he used to sleep in, as a dancer. Yet it has touches of personality in a way Will's room never did – a stack of papers on the night stand, half melted candles along the wall, a chair with neatly folded clothes. Marks of a human life, as it were.

A note rings out in the darkness; Will turns to face the door and finds that there is light peeking out from under it. The light jumps and dances, like it comes from a fire, and Will feels brave enough to slide his shoes into his slippers and go investigate.

After all, if his Angel brought him into his hearth and home, Will is a guest, and it would abominably rude to kill a guest.

The door opens to a little corridor. Will spies another door, half open, that leads to a small bathroom, but he passes it, for he is more interested in what lies at the end of the corridor. It opens to a sitting room, large enough to entertain a party of six or so, a crackling fireplace at one end and a fine sofa at another. In the middle of the room is a large piano, with sheets of music stacked neatly to the side, and seated atop the bench is his Angel, head bent forward, swaying gently to the music as his fingers fly over the keys.

The music is beautiful and entrancing, nothing like Will has ever heard, but it is certainly not angelic.

Will thinks about the Phantom, and how his Angel spoke of petty human squabbles, and wonders, perhaps, if the Phantom is the face his Angel uses to deal with petty human things. Or perhaps his Angel *is* the Phantom, two parts of the same whole, and Will has bound himself to a human with the devil's mastery of shadows and manipulation.

After all, Will's father bound himself to a monster too, once upon a time, and never saw the hidden fangs in the Vicomte's smile until it was too late.

Will toes out of his shoes and pads forward, silent as can be. The Vicomte taught him how to be still and quiet, how to not be heard, how to slide his feet against the floor and time his breaths to his movement. Staff are meant only to be seen when called upon, of course, and the children of staff should never even be seen. So Will creeps forward, silent as a mouse, and comes to a stop right behind his Angel.

Angels can appear as humans, of course, and usually do to avoid frightening them, but Will can smell his Angel's sweat, he can see his Angel's chest moving as he breathes, he can hear his Angel's heartbeat.

Perhaps his Angel is no angel at all.

Will hooks a finger under the mask, and cannot fight the gasp at the feel of warm skin – warm human skin – underneath.

His Angel's hand flashes up, settling tight around his wrist, squeezing as though he means to break it, even though he does not stop playing with his other hand. Calm as the winter breeze, his Angel says, "What are you trying to accomplish, my darling?"

Will pulls, and finds he cannot break the hold. His Angel, human or not, is strong, at least. "You saw me," Will tells him. "You said we could gaze upon each other, so that there was no doubt."

"And you have doubt?"

"You never answered me."

His Angel's fingers slow, and then stop, teasing out one last sweet note to the heavens before he sighs and drops the hand to his lap. He turns his head, just slightly, and presses that same strange half-cold, half-warm kiss to Will's palm, like a lover. Then he turns to face Will, truly, and pulls until Will is forced to sit upon the bench or collapse on the floor.

"Very well," his Angel says, without releasing him. "I am the Phantom of the Opera, then. Is that what you wish to know?"

"So you are human?"

"That is your first question?"

"Would you prefer I ask instead if you would die if I strangled you?"

"Violent little thing," his Angel laughs. "Could you do it?"

" . . . I don't know," Will confesses, reluctantly. The one time he sneaked into the slaughterhouse, after all, he vomited, and could hardly stomach the tender lamb meat served at dinner that night.

"I think you could," his Angel says thoughtfully, rubbing his thumb up and down Will's wrist, like a metronome. "But that is neither here nor there. By your definition, yes, Will – I am human as you are."

"And by your definition?"

His Angel smiles. "I am so much, much more."

It's a chilling statement; Will has seen what happens when men think themselves greater than the rest. But Will would not say it was entirely a lie either, for plenty of men have tried to find the Phantom and failed, and not a single person has yet noticed that Will sings to an Angel at night. Perhaps there is a pedestal, somewhere, above a man and below an angel, where his Angel has carved out a place to live.

“Did I pass your test?” Will asks, because he knows that he has pushed his Angel far enough for one night.

His Angel dips his head. “With flying colors. You are ready, my dear. Beautiful and polished as a diamond, and all the stronger for it.”

“Ready for what?” Will breathes.

“For us to let all know what the music of the night sounds like,” his Angel replies. “Now then; come. You have sung for me, and so it is only right that I let you feast. You have more than earned it.”

“And to see you truly?”

His Angel rises to his feet, kissing Will on his palm again. He holds it tenderly, like a lover, and it makes strange emotions swell in Will’s chest. “That,” his Angel says, “you have yet to earn, my dear. But soon, I think. Soon.”

“How soon?”

“Soon,” his Angel repeats, and leads him into the kitchen. “Soon.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Next up, someone is a poor fool that makes everyone laugh & Will asks the Angel of Music what he wants.

P.S. There is indeed a horse in the book. And the awful Gerard Butler movie. Don't worry, someone else took care of the horse when the Angel took Will sailing. You can all probably guess who.

Also sorry for the delay in posting. Work and classes got super busy. Next one should be up sooner than a month XD

End Notes

If you enjoyed this and want to see more movie/TV show/video game AUs, please check out the rest of the works in the Reel Hannibal 2020 collection.

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